DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 137 197 SO 009 917

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TITLE Students, History Textbooks, and the Hidden Dimension. Occasional Paper Number 77-1.
INSTITUTION State Univ. of New York, Stony Brock. American Historical Association Faculty Development Program.
PUB DATE 1 Jul 76
NOTE 14p.

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Class Activities; *Critical Thinking; Data; Discovery Processes; Higher Education; *Historiography; *History Instruction; Observational Learning; Secondary Education; Teaching Techniques; *Textbook Bias; *Textbook Content; Textbook Evaluation; Textbook Preparation

ABSTRACT

Since history textbooks omit and/or emphasize certain data, students are left with a false sense of history. Although the "hard data" presented in history texts is generally regarded as reliable, the selection and organization of that data is inherently manipulative because other data has been excluded. Because authors do not begin with a description of the frame of reference which underlies their work, most historical writings have a hidden subjectivity. Three discovery exercises are presented to help secondary or undergraduate students overcome manipulation by texts and promote independent thought. In the first exercise, students identify data about the period 1972-76 which historians might include in one chapter of a text in the year 2050. Once a list of social, economic, and political data has been compiled, students decide which to emphasize and which to eliminate. Lack of concensus will demonstrate how objectivity becomes impossible. Classes can analyze their own texts from this perspective. Exercise two emphasizes how different forms of textbook organization lead the reader towards certain understandings and deemphasize others. In the third exercise, students try to select objective, analytical questions about given periods of history. An assignment to write ten objective sentences and ten analytical statements can point out that the distinction between "objective" and "analytical" is often not clear. (AV)

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AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION FACULTY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM

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Occasional Paper #77-1

STUDENTS, HISTORY TEXTBOOKS AND THE HIDDEN DIMENSION

by

Barry Kingman

SO 009 917

AMERICAN HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION FACULTY DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM
THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK, STONY BROOK, NEW YORK
1976

PREFACE

Regular readers of this series will recognize Barry Kingman, who is currently working in the Peace Corps in Africa, as the author of two earlier Occasional Papers, "Development of Values Clarification Skills: Initial Efforts in an 8th Grade Social Studies Class," Part I (August 1974) and Part II (November 1975), ED 090128 and ED 108979.

In this paper Mr. Kingman focuses on the student, history textbooks and the hidden dimension. Just what is this "hidden dimension"? It turns out to be a particular type of manipulation. Specifically, it is the hidden subjectivity of authors who do not describe the frame of reference underlying their work:

> The result is that students
> are quietly led towards
> some data and away from others.
> Because they are unaware of
> what is happening, they cannot
> respond critically to it.

This is not a call for a "laissez-faire" remedy, nor is it an uncritical attack against all teacher manipulation as a matter of principle, but rather an assault against the practice of "leading with a hidden hand." The author argues the case for teaching skills to overcome such manipulation and to encourage independent thought, and suggests a series of exercises designed to meet this objective.

Eli Seifman
General Editor
Stony Brook AHA/FDP

Students, History Textbooks,
and the Hidden Dimension

Barry Kingman
July 1, 1976

In the early sixties, I attended a progressive high school with a good college preparatory program emphasizing thought skills. When I graduated, I had a sense of how to work with syllogisms and I could identify and resist many of the tricks of false logic. Yet at the same time, the textbooks we used had manipulated us towards a false sense of history and left us totally unequipped to actively deal with that manipulation. In retrospect it seems that the false sense of history mattered less than the lack of ability to respond to the manipulative forces which instilled it.

After four years of high school history (my favorite subject), I was left with the understanding that history was a string of political events centering on capital cities. Historical analysis explained how one event led to another. The process which led me to this misunderstanding was manipulative and not directive because rather than openly moving me towards an explicitely stated goal, it edged me along with a hidden hand. Course textbooks never openly stated that history took place in capital cities and was made by presidents and generals. They never told me not to waste my time on labor history, or social institutions or questions about how dominant classes maintained their position and how people on the bottom responded. The textbooks simply did not deal with these topics. At times there were gestures towards cultural and social history buried behind lengthy political

narrative, but most of us sensed correctly where the emphasis was. Thus without ever explicitly stating what history was, our textbooks, by their omission, manipulated us towards false impressions.

Now the reader might have little sympathy for an historical emphasis on class conflict, but that is not the point here. I am concerned that students are not being taught to systematically identify and actively respond to the manipulation of written history. I suspect the cause of this is a lingering belief that objectivity exists. If objectivity did exist, the problem with hidden manipulation would be less serious. We would merely have to teach the students to distinguish between biased materials and those which can be trusted. Believers in objectivity admit that school textbooks may often be superficial, but they claim that textbooks, like encyclopedias and dictionaries, deal with hard data and are reliable.

In fact all history is subjective, whether in "factual" textbooks or in radical polemics. The difference between written history and the chaos one finds in state archives is that the former has taken the confusion of too much data with too little organization and condensed it into an orderly narrative, hopefully with some explanatory content. Most teachers and students readily see the subjectivity in the explanatory content, but do not see subjectivity in the "hard data." After all, no one doubts that George Washington was our first president nor that chattel slavery was ended by the Civil War. I agree that there exists a body of generally accepted facts which might well be called

objective facts since their acceptance is based on overwhelming documentary evidence. Nonetheless, subjectivity here is inevitable, for even a textbook chronology has to select which facts are to be included and which are to be omitted; which facts are to be emphasized and which are to be mentioned briefly. There is never enough time, never enough space to tell it all. Patriotic textbooks list national achievements, progressive texts outline social injustice, balanced accounts do both, yet none of these include a description of those mechanisms which have promoted stability and allowed dominant groups to maintain their position. Anyone who has ever prepared an historical lecture or paper knows that the pile of unused notecards is invariably larger than the pile of those used.

The subjectivity inherent in the selection and organization of historical data becomes manipulative when it is hidden. Most historical writings, especially textbooks, have a hidden subjectivity because the authors do not begin with a description of the frame of reference which underlies their work. The result is that students are quietly led towards some data and away from others. Because they are unaware of what is happening, they cannot respond critically to it. The educator seeking to break away from this manipulation must first convince teachers and pupils that the subjectivity and manipulation exist. He must then teach skills to overcome the manipulation and promote independent thought. Below is a series of exercises which might help in fulfilling these goals.

* * *

Explain to the class that they are going to spend some time working with the concepts of objectivity, subjectivity, manipulation and direction. The goal of the exercise is to help them respond more independently to teachers and textbooks. To warm the class to the topic, the teacher might ask for a show of hands. How many students feel that the course textbook is factual, reliable and objective? How many feel that the textbook has a large element of personal belief and must be read with considerable suspicion? I suspect that most students will vote for the first choice, but if they do not, it does not matter. The teacher should announce that the following exercises are designed to create a more sophisticated awareness of the subjectivity in history textbooks, including the one used in this course.[1]

Data Selection

After this brief introduction, the teacher should have the students pretend they are historians in the year 2050 preparing a history of the United States in the last half of the twentieth century. The task at hand is a chapter on the four years between the elections of 1972 and 1976. The teacher elicits data which

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[1] I am presently teaching English as a foreign language in Africa and thus have not been able to field test this exercise in its present form. The exercise is nonetheless a product of experience. It evolved organically in response to the needs of freshman students at the State University of New York at Stony Brook and eighth graders at a private school near the University. With some adjustments the exercise is thus suited for both secondary school and university students.

might be used in the chapter and makes a list on the blackboard. To avoid too much blackboard work, the teacher should write topics rather than specific data. If the students are not providing a sufficiently wide variety of material, the teacher can guide them by asking for more economic data, more data about daily life etc. To complete the list the teacher might add some data of his own. It is important here that the materials on the board illustrate the variety of data which might be included and the impossibility of including it all. Below is a sample list.

Presidential and congressional decisions related to Watergate
Major supreme court decisions of the period
Major congressional debates
The use of presidential vetoes
State department decisionson the Middle East and detente with the Soviet Union
Decisions concerning foreign aid
The structure of the federal courts during the period and their relation to state courts
The organization and policies of HEW
The powers of the House Ways and Means Committee
Attempts to change legislative procedures in Congress
The policies and structure of the CIA, FBI and Internal Revenue Service
The structure of the public schools
Pedagogical trends
Teacher's unions
The financial crisis in private colleges
The structure and policies of American trade unions
The job market, who cannot find a job which schooling is most marketable
Corporate structure
Government structures regulating business activities
Student activism
Changes in the divorce and birth rate
Changes in residency patterns and levels of job stability
Rock music
Berkeley counter culture
Urban police departments
Living conditions in the coal mining regions of the Appalachian mountains

How food stamps are distributed in rural Mississippi
School desegration in Boston
Residential segregation on Long Island
Black employment
The structure of black pressure groups and their policies
Economic mobility patterns
Class strucutre
The structure, mechanisms and message of the media

Once the list is on the board, the teacher has the pupils debate which items should be emphasized and which should be elimihated. (Remember, the students are historians writing a single chapter on the period and cannot include everything.) The goal here is to provide an opportunity for the disagreement which must surely arise. The teacher might divide the class into groups asking each group to come to an agreement on the relative importance of the items on the list. Or the teacher might ask individual students to list items of high and low importance and then ask the class to vote on whether or not they agree. Individual students could then be asked to justify their vote. After the disagreement has continued long enough to leave a vivid impression, the teacher should point to the lack of consensus and explain how objectivity becomes impossible. This might lead to a discussion of just what objectivity is. The dictionary defines objective statements as those statements which discuss "the nature of reality as it is apart from personal reflections or feelings".[2] As long as there is significant

[2] Webster's Seventh New Collegiate Dictionary, Springfield, Mass.: G. & C. Merriam Co., 1961.

disagreement about what should or should not be included, there can be no historical texts devoid of personal feelings.

At this point it might be useful to take a chapter from the textbook used for the course (preferably a chapter which appears to be "objective") and identify the material which might have been included, but has been left out. The author of the text has inevitably led the reader to an emphasis on the material he has included and a neglect of the material he has left out. The students should identify the author's emphasis and discuss whether or not they agree with it. (Concern about material not included could lead to independent reading projects.) The teacher can then introduce the concepts of manipulation and direction, and elicit definitions from the class. A dictionary definition stresses the unfairness of manipulation.[3] In history, the unfairness enters when the historian leads his reader with a hidden hand. The reader is unaware of what is happening and cannot respond independently. If this does not come out in student comments, the teacher should explain it. At the end of this exercise, the students should be left with a vivid sense of how even the most "objective" textbook narratives are opinionated and manipulative.

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[3] Ibid., p.515

Textbook Organization

The class should now return to the original list of data which should be deliberately written on the board in the chaotic fashion in which most data emerges. Taking whichever data they think is most important, the students should briefly write how they would organize it.[4] The teacher could then write the various means of organization that arise on the board. The students might organize the material according to time periods, according to various institutions, according to problems, according to areas of progress, etc. The teacher should then elicit how different forms of organization might lead the reader towards certain understandings and deemphasize others. A chronological organization draws attention to relations in time; an institutional organization might emphasize individual institutions while neglecting the time factor or how individual institutions interact.

The class might then look at the organization of their textbook and perhaps other historical studies in the school library. As a homework assignment they could be asked: 1) to identify the basis of the organization of the course textbook or another book, 2) to discuss other possible ways of organizing the material, 3) to explain in what direction the existing organization leads the readers.

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[4]This exercise is probably more difficult than the one dealing with which data should be included and might not be suited for younger students.

Selection of Analytical Questions

The same procedure which was followed to illustrate the hidden direction in data selection and data organization could be followed again to illustrate a further hidden direction in the analytical questions an author decides to pursue and those he omits. The students could list analytical questions related to the original data list on the period from 1972 to 1976. Questions about the effectiveness of congressional surveillance of the CIA, or why Nixon got caught, or how Kissinger became such a powerful man might arise. Class disagreement on the relative importance of these questions would again illustrate the impossibility of objectivity.

The class might then try to identify the analytical questions dealt with in a chapter of the textbook. If they have trouble, this would be a good time to discuss how objectivity can exist in a limited form and illustrate how it is different from analytical or explanatory content. A chapter on American education after World War II, for example, might state that in 1954, the Supreme Court declared that separate schools for black and white children were inherently unequal. It has already been illustrated that this statement is subjective in that it uses space to mention one thing when it might have mentioned another. However, this

statement also has a limited objectivity which distinguishes it from analytical statements. It is easily verified and generally accepted. This statement can be distinguished from statements claiming that the Supreme Court played an important role in the early Civil Rights Movement or that segregated schools were the primary cause of black unemployment.

To reenforce the distinction presented here, the students might be given an assignment to write ten "objective" sentences and ten analytical statements. Several examples might be discussed in the next class. During this discussion, it should become clear that the distinction is often not sharp, that the verifiable gradually shades into the speculative.

At this point the students should again try to identify the analytical questions dealt with in a chapter of the textbook. They should then discuss which questions were given more emphasis and which were neglected or completed omitted. Further discussion about which questions the students feel are most important should lead to disagreement and illustrate that the textbook author's emphasis is based largely on personal opinion.

* * *

The exercises discussed here could fill as much as three or four hours of class and might become repetitive. It might be

best to present the three sections separately, leaving a week or so between each section. Since these exercises are designed to develop skills as well as conceptual understandings, they should be used repeatedly as the students encounter new readings.

The material presented here is a discovery exercise and not inquiry. It leads the students to a predetermined goal rather than stimulating thought which can be allowed to follow an unplanned course. Such exercises can be easily criticized for being manipulative. While pretending to allow free thought, the teacher closely controls the direction of class discussion. Am I using a manipulative exercise to counteract the manipulations of written history? I think not, because the direction is not hidden. Before the exercise is begun, the teacher announces the ultimate goal. There is no pretense of unstructured discussion. If the teacher leads the students to the announced goal in a somewhat roundabout way, it is to have the students experience and play with the problem at length, so that they will be left with more profound impressions.